THE MAN ON THE HILLTOP

ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

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THE MAN ON THE HILLTOP

BY ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

SONNETS OF A PORTRAIT-PAINTER

MR. FAUST

THE BREAKING OF BONDS

TWELVE JAPANESE PAINTERS

THE HAPPY PRINCESS

THE EARTH PASSION

FROM THE ISLES

THE MAN ON THE HILLTOP AND OTHER POEMS

BY

ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

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HISTORIES

THE MAN ON THE HILLTOP

SHADOWS are round him in my memory —
Impenetrable shadows, peopling full
A universe where streams of heavy light
Reveal strange crouching forms of ominous doom.
As in the sun's and moon's and stars' eclipse
I see him on that hilltop; mighty wings
Flap from the sky above him and surround
With fierce and fluctuating winds. Alone,
Sleepless, he waits in his allotted place
Amid these howling kingdoms of the void;
Defiant, sacrificed, and conquering;
Mad; but a great heart, an heroic heart.

'Twas thus I came upon him: —

When, at end
Of college years, one winter, first I learned
That, if I loved this curious human life
To which we all with blind affection cling,
I must with instant haste betake myself
To regions far from Massachusetts' coasts,
In hope that desert air would make me whole
And hearty,— as in fact it well has done.
And so I went, not fain at all to die;
And for two years lived on the western plains
At a friend's ranch until my peril passed.
There first I saw the man of whom my tale

Chiefly shall speak — a raw-boned, flaxen-haired
Sheepherder; tall of brow, with sunken eyes,
And jaw as clean-cut as a vessel's prow: —
One of those smouldering, intense, strange men
Whom no spot breeds except the northern fiords.
He had a name common in his own land —
Larson: — no common man, for all of that,
But a great heart; — twisted, awry and blind,—
Swayed by strange tyrannies, the dupe of dreams,—
Yet a great heart, moving in mists obscure,
Protagonist of shadows, single-armed
Champion against the terrors of the night.

He had come hither from some eastern town,—
Pittsburgh, I think,— where his dark youth had passed
In grip of stern privations. He was born
Child of a foundry-worker, one of four,
Brought up on mill-smoke. In the earlier years
No harder was his lot than many a one
Which still, upon the whole, brings happiness
That makes life worth the living. But too soon
Poverty taught him more than any child,
Could we direct these things, should ever know.
One day, toward noontime, taking to the mill
His father's pail, he, pausing in the door,
Saw a great crucible swing overhead,
Moving along the runways of the cranes,

And then poise,— sway with rending jar,— and fall,
Scattering a hail of fire, a cataract
Of white and glowing steel, that gulfed three men,—
One man his father,— in the awful flood.
He told me this; and without words I knew
How, like the searing touch of that fierce stream,
The sight had burned itself upon his brain,—
A thing to tremble at when in the night
Those spectres rose. And unforgettingly
Had passed before his eyes the house of grief,
Where terror of the future almost numbed
The present sorrow. Then came poverty,
And vain appeals to the calm men who sat
In the mill's office with their desks and files
Of many papers; the recourse at last
To one of those grey wolves who sometimes hunt
Under the law's cloak; the unending trial
That sapped the widow's final hoard: — these things,
Seen by a child who with his mother stood,
Three younger ones beside him, and looked out
Into the endless and appalling void
Of destitution, could not be forgot,
But needs must bend the corners of the mouth
And sink the eyes to sparks in their deep caves.
Before the law remediless they stood,
Smitten by chance, that untamed walks the earth;
Yet, that being true, how little did it feed

The hungry mouths! How utterly their fate
Upon them must have fallen like the blow
Of evil and malignant deity.

He never told me how he struggled on:
It was not hard to guess,— the crumpled years
Of childhood, till at last he reached that age,
So pitifully young, at which the poor
Think children may go forth to earn their bread.
Into the mills he went: there many years
He worked among the crucibles, as worked
His father once before him. But when death
Came to his mother, and some distant kin
Took the three other children, he threw off
The hateful bondage; and went wandering forth
Westward, to newer regions where a life
Not cursed with the old curse might wait for him.

He was a silent man, who made no friends
Among his lighter comrades; though goodwill
Was not refused him. He had little talk,
And that was mostly of the needful things,—
Weather, and care of horses, and the sheep.
But sometimes would a chance word start his speech
Into a burst of sombre eloquence
Or smouldering passion,— all on one fixed theme,
The wrongs of laborers. Once I came on him

Out in the stableyard, haranguing there,
With unaccustomed fervency, a group
Of scoffing sheepherders. I heard him say —
" It is the hell-fire burning at earth's core.—
Men slave like dogs to earn the right to live
Like dogs: the profit of their labor falls
From their starved fingers. All the sightless rich
Are leagued together to oppress and crush
The laborer. He cannot lift his head,
Or down into the trampled dust they fling
Him and his children. You have never seen,
As I have, the fierce hell that, in the mills
And out of them, enfolds those living men.
No one sees things as I do! . . ."

Looking back
In memory now, I think his brooding nights
And silent days all circled round that thought,
Which drew and held him with a baleful power
Until its image grew, towered, loomed above
All else, and blotted out the universe
With its oppressive shadow.

Once he said —
" Children of sorrow cannot be released.
They are blind, leaderless; and if Moses led,
Out of the Wilderness toward the Promised Land,

No one would follow. Now each blow that falls
Upon the race falls heaviest on their backs.
They are the buffers of misfortune."

Words
Half-biblical were his when thus he spoke,
As sometimes is the way of simple men
Speaking with earnestness from crowded hearts.

One day I said — "Surely it is some fault
That keeps men common laborers all their lives.
To good men comes an opportunity"—
He answered — "In the valley where they live
Nothing comes ever but the smoke of hell;
And their wild cries, rising, would shake the world
If it had blood, not iron, in its veins."
Much more he said, which I have long forgot,—
Wild words that seethed from out some chaos shut
Close in his breast. He was a sombre man;
Sometimes absurd and sometimes terrible.

It was that Spring,— that memorable Spring,—
When from mysterious space the Comet came
Blazing upon us. And I well recall
How, long foretold by savants ere to sight
Of human eye its shape was visible,
It stirred, among the ignorant, dim fears

And wild conjecture; so that some believed
It would destroy this globe, or with its train
Of fatal gases kill all breathing life.
We, like the rest, as the high day approached
When it should sweep most closely to the earth,
Made our bad jokes, and bantered to and fro
Talk of the hour when debts and sins should end;
And planned to die in drink; and such poor chaff.
"Larson," I said, "you, probably, alone
Will be alive on earth when it has passed —
For you are used to breathing Pittsburgh air,
And nothing matters after that."

"No, no,"
Another of us grinned, "Larson will crawl
Under his own eyebrows, and hide there safe
Till all is past."

And then we laughed again.
But Larson, who had listened to our talk
With an intentness grave beyond its worth,
Smiled not at all. He fixed on us the gaze
Of eyes like sparks,— not angry, but possessed
By some more secret vision of his own
And far removed from us; — and while we laughed
He left us quietly without reply.
And for some days thereafter, he would walk

Much by himself, and scan the starry sky
Alone at night, and mutter broken words,
And start when spoken to.

Then came the time
To send a herder to relieve that one
Who, for a month's term, had kept lonely watch
Over the sheep upon the upland ranch
Sixty miles distant. No one loved the task;
Hence in recurrent order all the men
Served out their turn. Now in its sequence due
Was Larson's month at hand,— a month of Spring.
And so we sent him out one April day,
Out from the noisy banter of our midst,
To the monotonous vigil of the heights.
I see him still as he rode hillward,— gaunt,
Ungraceful on his horse, looking not back
With any sign of parting, but alone
And facing grimly forward,— a gray shape
In the first dawnlight, growing ever less
Against the distant slopes.

In three days, came
Back from the hill-ranch he whose cheerless month
At last was over. A great boisterousness
And a great need of drink possessed his soul;
But when the first was spent, the last assuaged,
He spoke of Larson: —

"What is all this talk
About the Comet? Is it really near?
Larson has told me it is sweeping on
A million miles an hour, toward the earth,
A terrible portent, coming to rain down
Mysterious influences of evil power
Upon the world, but chiefly upon those
Who labor in the mills. When it is past,
No toiler ever will draw happy breath,
But only choked with evil. They must die,
Or by the awful gases be transformed
Into corroded miserable beings
With lives of agony."

The men all laughed.
I did not laugh; for something in the strange
Fathomless shadow which I always felt
Deep within Larson's mind loomed now to me
Dimly foreboding. But the man went on: —

"He said to me, shortly before I left,
Things like a book, or like the words I heard
Once from a pulpit. He's a curious one;
This is the way he talked: — 'My thoughtless friend,
The evil days have come; curses shall fall
Upon men from the heavens, but most on those
Who most are cursed already. O prepare!

For the time approaches. Go: carry to the world
Tidings from me that men must now atone.
I have thought long, and light at last has dawned:
I, only I, know wherefore this has come
Toward earth, and of what evils it is sign,
And the one hope to save the world. Atone!
Atone for evil suffered and evil done,
Ye men of sorrow! Who shall now arise,
Not leader, but apart from all, to fight
The sole and dreadful battle for the race?'
Much more he said; I did not understand
Half that he spoke besides. At any rate,
The hill-ranch is a lonesome place to be
If one has only such thoughts on his mind."

Lonesome indeed! And yet I did not speak
Nor act,— as we so often in our lives
Refrain from speech or deed until too late
For all except regret. But when four days
Had passed, uneasiness laid hold of me.
It seemed barbaric torture, thus condemning
To banishment on solitary heights
A man pursued by demons of the soul.
So I determined on a four days' tour
To see the mountains, meaning to delay
One day with Larson, with what cheer I could
Bringing some respite to his solitude.

Therefore next morning I proceeded forth
With one good rancher. The unchanging sweep
Flowed by on either side as all day long
We traversed the monotonous sage-brush plains,
A fiery sun above us; all day long
The distant mountains slowly crept more near,
Not changing as we watched, yet every hour
More towering than the last. And just at dusk
Weary, we saw ahead the upland ranch.
I had not visited the place till now;
And curiously I scanned it as we rode,—
Saw the gray flocks grow plain upon the slopes,
And the small cabin and the stable-yard
Loftily builded. We could not descry
Larson afar, nor hear him make response
To our loud greetings. On we went, the night
Falling around us, though some silvery gleam
Still shone across the west. Ahead, the hill
Rose steep; and in that treeless land, one tree,
Shattered by wind, stood black against the sky
Above the hilltop, centring the long slopes
Toward it. And then the tree drew all my gaze
By some ambiguous strangeness in its shape —
Straight, blasted, with two stumps of limbs, confused
Masses of leafage on its trunk. My thought
Forgot the man we sought as I pressed on
Toward the stiff tree; and then, suddenly cold,

A weakness closed like fangs upon my heart:
I saw the man had crucified himself.

There on a cross of heavy beams he hung,
Nails through his feet and through one open hand,
While with the other hand he limply clutched
At the rough cross-piece. And around him clung
A dusk of agony. His sunken eyes
Opened not; but at sound of our quick steps
His lips moved feebly and he spoke: —

" Have peace.
All has been done: the evils are atoned;
They shall go by and trouble men no more.
This last curse on the bowed heads shall not fall:
On theirs it shall not fall, but mine, mine, mine,
Which has received it for the whole world's sake.
I have been chosen, I have been sent forth
Up to the hill-tops and the desert places
There to atone, atone. All has been done.
Fear not; the doom is past."

And when at length
From that most awful eminence we bore
His broken form, his lips moved, but no breath
Came from between them. And he shortly died.

Shadows are round him in my memory.
Mad; but a great heart, an heroic heart.

AT ST. STEPHANOS

HIGH, high above the thatched roofs of the town,—
An hundred times more high than lifts the tower
Of the Cathedral,— higher than the song
Of nightingale ascends, or swallow's wing —
There, where the splintered cliff dizzily drops,
Sheerer than headland of Gibraltar's straits,
In one precipitous rock-cloven wall
To low-lying fields,— there stands an ancient House
Of refuge and secluded holiness.

Toward it at sunset from the plains I came,
Through long defiles ascending, past gaunt slopes
And barren gullies of the wind-swept hills
Tenantless as the moon. Upon the crests
The light still shone; though far below, the dusk
Covered the fields and with the fear of night
Amid these wilds o'ertaking me, urged on
My climbing feet.

Suddenly on a crag
That century-beaten, gray-walled monastery
Against the solemn fires of the west
Lifted its battlements and pointed roofs
And faintly smoking chimneys, in the dusk
Bastions of grayness. My approaching step
Echoed upon the drawbridge, whose frail span
Across a narrow deeply-cloven chasm
Hung tremulous. Through the dim portal arch

And low cold passageways of mouldering stone
I passed, in wonder at these massive walls;
And stood in the gray court,— as empty now
As though its vanished centuries had borne
With them away into far gulfs of Time
What life had once found place here. On three sides,
The alcoved galleries of the cloisters rose,
Half-ruined, cheerless: on the fourth, a gate
Out toward a platform opened, where the rock
Became the precipice. There spread the West
A burning flood before me, and the peaks
Of the white Pindus from it rising up
Like snow-capped islands; and far, far below,
Even at my feet, submerged beneath the tide
Of shadowy haze, the plains of Thessaly.

Then in the high still air a bell began
Somewhere its vesper tolling; and those sounds,
Blurring and blending with recurrent strokes,
Drifted about me, islanded aloft
Upon that far-seeing headland; while below,
Small and remote, the villages of the plain
Withdrew into the mists of eventide.
And pausing thus, upon my spirit came
That nameless sense,— like odour in a dream,—
Of ending Summer and the sudden hour
Of the year's passing which September brings

To thrall the musing wanderer on the slopes.
Then the bell ceased; and from the chapel doors
Poured St. Stephanos' holy Brethren forth,
Dark men and bearded, clad in girdled robes,—
The garb of those who from the general band
Of priesthood had themselves to single life
Vowed, and to poverty,— not the common lot
For clergy of Byzantium. Forth they strode
With kindly faces and the greeting hands
That are the portion of a stranger chanced
From the great world unto monastic walls,—
About whose base the seething tide of days
Beats with tumultuous surges, casting up
To this lone height rarely a drop of spray
Or sound articulate of the dizzy strife.

With friendly cheer, they took my pack and staff;
And led me to the ancient raftered hall
Where, round a board sufficient for the need
Of three-score Brethren, the remaining few,—
Seven and the Abbot,— took their daily fare.
Diminished now that ancient company
Which in the darker ages here maintained
A citadel of peace amid wild wars.
Paler, this band, and of less dominant blood,—
Yet Brethren of great St. Stephanos still,
And heritors of those who once upreared

This lonely fortress for the praise of God.
Strange men, strange heritors, these my hosts to-night;
With whom I sat, and ate the evening meal
Of kid and lentils and thin acid wine
With resin steeped,— scant fare, befitting priests
Vowed unto poverty in a meagre land,—
Not milk and honey; — and heard the simple talk
Of the old Abbot,— how the Summer closed
Early this year; and how the long ascent
Had left me weary, doubtless. And this speech
Of common things which drifted to and fro
Served but to fill me with a keener sense
Of utter strangeness. Round our casual talk
I felt great vistas opening pathless out,—
Unsounded hopes and passions of these hearts,
Alien to mine. From these unfathomed eyes
Looked forth the keepers of a secret life
Upon a separate world, to me unknown.
Their gaze beheld another sun than mine;
The very breeze to them not as to me
Bore waftures of unrest or peace or pain;
Within their souls a different dream of heaven
Sustained or tortured. And that wonder grew
As down the table from grave face to face
My glances strayed; and strong my passion burned
To know what meaning filled their thoughts and days,—
What boundaries and what contours marked the world

Which, through the strange refraction of the soul,
Each one surveyed, alone
Methought they seemed,—
These Brethren of the Heights,— kind, simple hearts,
Rude shepherds of rude flocks, unlettered, slow,
Habituated to the pious days
And narrow duties of the monastery.
Within those eyes no subtler passion leaped
Than dogmas of corporeal heaven and hell
Might teach them: and their little round of being,
Changeless, sufficient, circumscribed and pure,
Passed like the herdsman's in the lowlier plains —
Daylight to dusk, and year to year, one course
Of unreflective tasks that left no trace
Upon the scroll of inward history.

But one among the Brethren, whom the rest
Called Theodorus, seemed of other mould
Than all his fellows. In his face the South
Spoke warm and radiant. Something in his gaze
Like hesitant intensity of fire
That flickered, clung, and died,— or the full lips
And delicate profile, bringing to my mind
A poet of pale beauties, lately dead,
Whom now his land acclaimed,— or the desire
Hardly concealed, which made his features glow
Attentively a listener as I told

Some curious traveller's tale,— these drew my thought
Recurrently to him. And when his smile
Gleamed with a flash of eagerness for joy,
Like starlight among candles, then I felt
A sudden pang of pity. Here, methought,
Was one to whom the lusty sinful world
Was not well lost,— in whom still burned the spark
Of love for all which faith calls vanity.
His face betrayed the harp vibrant within.
The call of beauty never unto him
Were cold, unmeaning. Each mysterious voice
Which from the loveliness of hill or cloud
Or dream or music calls our blood, as calls
The west wind to the waves,— these things would be
For him the secret masters of his soul.
And while his Brethren mounted to Heaven's Gate
With calm unswerving steps, him must the breath
Of Maytide mornings make their quivering sport.
A bird-note could whirl chaos through his prayer.
His vowed allegiance to the Virgin Throne
Must waver at the beauty of a flower
Or the soft curve of some girl's shadowy throat
Seen in the dusk. And if at last he gained
The prophets' Paradise, it needs must be
By hard-won mastery which to ruder souls
Were all unknown. Perilous lay the road,
Through chanting vales, to his celestial home.

At length the meal was ended; and we passed
In straggling twos and threes out of the hall
To the rock-platform, where the stars looked down
Brilliantly on us, and the gulf beneath
Lay vague and fathomless. Beside me paced
Now Theodorus, as in eager talk
He held me from the rest; with outstretched arm
Pointing this place and that,— towns, mountains, streams,—
All hidden in the night. And one by one
The Brethren left us for their evening tasks;
He only lingered yet.

"Tell me," he said
"How moves the world in Athens? Do they still
Place little tables at the café doors,
And sit all afternoon, and watch the crowds,
And smoke and talk? And do the soldiers drill
Out beyond Lycabettus as they used?
And the Piræus, that bright sinful port,
Do the great ships still crowd the harbor's mouth,
And boatmen throng the wharves? — Or has the world
Grown quieter than in my day?"

"The world,"
I answered, "is not quick to change its ways.
I think that you would find all things the same,

Even to the tables,— where three days ago
I sat and smoked and watched the crowds go by,
And saw the King pass with his shining guards
And troops of cavalry."
His attentive eyes
Gleamed with the picture.
"And when did you last
See white-walled Athens?" I with idle thought
Questioned him. And with slow words he replied —
"Twelve years ago: then I became a priest." . . .
And spoke no more; but shortly turned away,
Murmuring of his tasks that must be done.

Then paced I silently the platform's bounds;
As, on some farthest rampart of the world,
Alone, at night, a spirit from the stars
Beyond Orion might alight and pace;
And looking down upon the sleeping earth
From that secluded outpost's icy height,
Marvel in silence on the pageant spread
Beneath his vision, with the crowded thoughts
Of one whose being had therein no part.
And for this spirit tenanting my breast
Wonder was dominant,— labyrinthine moods,—
And sense not of the kinship of mankind
But of Life's strangeness and the infinite forms
Of days and destinies.

The processional stars
Moved slow above me. As I tarried still,
Out of the cloisters Theodorus came
And silently rejoined me; and our steps
Sounded together, back and forth the rock.
The great hush of the hour, the shroud of dark,
Stifling all echoes of departed day,
Enfolded us. We were alone with night,—
Night, that in such a silence seems to drop
The measureless beatings of gigantic wings
On the frail heart. With such a presence close,
Our deep seclusion from the sleeping world,
Our slow concordant footfalls, wove a sense
Of some strange bond between us as we strode
Mute and together. On that barrier-ledge,
Raised like an altar to the lifeless stars,
A magic greater than old fellowship
Drew me to him with whom I seemed alone
In the vast dusk: across the trackless seas
That sunder man from man, my thought reached out
Unto this alien, who for one strange hour
Seemed as a brother.

Something bade me say,
After long silence —" I could half believe
That all the world lay dead beneath our feet,
And you and I upon this lonely rock
Solely remained."

"Sometimes not more alone"
He said, "than thus, is one who strays afar
Circled by minds that have a different birth."
And through the darkness his unquiet eyes
Seemed bent upon me.

Well I knew he spoke
With thought of me, a stranger; but to me
An alienage profounder than my own
Seemed to encircle him; and to his words
I answered, with his keen impassioned face
Vivid before my sight.—

"My friend," I said,
"For you this pinnacle must be a tomb:
You need the sunlands."

And he understood,
And flushed, with changing eyes, as though my words
Had touched the harp-strings in his breast and waked
Unutterable voices.

"No," he cried,
"No land,— but life!" . . .

His speech faltered away;
And I could feel beneath the burdened words

An impulse,— rare in our cold northern race,—
The longing to reveal to alien eyes
Things that perhaps could never be revealed
Save to a stranger,— one whose path lay far,
So far that never any later day
Of faith turned bitter could bring forth regret
That he had spoken.

But no words I said,
Being unwilling to invite his speech
Unless his heart impelled him; I but drew
A little closer, with attentive ear:
While ministry of silence told my mood
With greater eloquence than mortal tongue
Could master, doubtless; and I heard his breath,
And tremors seemed to shake him; and at last
From subterranean chambers hid from light,
Long sealed and voiceless, now in broken words,
With many a pause and space for groping thought,
Poured forth such speech as from no other man
I ever heard, nor like shall hear again.

"I think that you are one who understands.
When our eyes met across the board to-night
You looked at me with glance that well might read
Something of those dim travails of the mind
Which to the Brethren here upon the rock

Possess no being. Righteous men are these,
But peasant-priests, half-kindred to the herds,
Ignorant of the strange convulsive powers
That may inhabit us. . . .

" My stranger-friend,
Things long repressed burn on my lips to-night,
Born of your look, your voice." . . .

Gently I said —
" I will devote my heart to understand."
And at those words, he spoke — as Winter snows
In the Spring floods sweep o'er the thirsty lands.—

" You find me here, a Brother in the halls
Of St. Stephanos; but my birth was far
In southern islands, where the Cyclades
Lie like a barrier westward from one isle: —
O isle of brightness I shall not know again,
Mykonos, bride of sea-winds and the sea!
My home, amid the windmills on the heights,
Looked out toward Delos and the western waves
Wherein the sun sank down each eventide
With hues that were to me song poured from heaven,—
A wild enchantment, drawing forth my soul
In longing for all beauty. On the hills
Of her, my rocky island, as a boy

I walked in vision; and the ancient tales
Of Homer, and the legends of the shrine
That once was crown of Delos, and the forms
And colors and wild odours which my dreams
Wove from the sunsets and the changing spray,
Wrought in my soul a passion, a desire
Past understanding, for exalted deeds
And life that should be beautiful, like the Gods!
I was a Pagan, with the bards who sang
Once from these isles the praises of the fair
Golden Apollo. From some headland rock,
Looking across the waves, I could have raised
My pæan, too, of sacrificial joy
Unto the deities of sun and sea!

I scarce remember in what forms I dreamed;
Yet well I know that dreams by night and day
Moved where I moved, building a world apart
From unregarded casual daily things.
I dwelt among those moments, few and crowning,
Which chronicle and legend garner up
From the lone triumphs of heroic hearts,—
Time's precious harvest, slowly winnowed forth
Out of the lives of thousands who go down
Barren of such a radiant grain. All peaks
Whence man views life as lord: — what Jason saw
With the first hope, and at the final goal;

What Alexander felt when the last gate
Of secret Eastern city fell, and kings
Knelt at his chariot; what Euripides
Knew as the multitude with bated breath
Quivered and was dumb to hear Electra speak: —
Out of such marvelous fragments as these things
I wrought my fair mosaic, that served my faith
As pattern of the world and of man's life.

Ah, I was happy! but no more content
Than ever man is. My enkindled thoughts,
Fed upon visions, whispered that afar
And yet untasted lay that sunlit world
Whereof the pallid moon-dreams of my youth
Were but a shadow and a prophecy.
Glowing, it called me toward the richer days
Of which my hope breathed and the poets sung.
Now must the mystery, long viewed afar,—
Life, Life itself, unbosom unto me
Its beautiful meaning. Wherefore did I stay,
Tarrying in the porch before the shrine?
Nay, I would enter to the inmost hall,
To the close presence of that deity
Who, though remote, with palpitant glowing touch
Had waked divinest madness in my breast,
And the dim promise of sharp loveliness,
And uttermost longing for the clasp of Life.

Therefore, obedient to that stirring call
Heard in lone hours, filled with exalted thought,
I left my rocky island and keen spray
Of salty winds, and unto Athens came,
There to abide and earn my bread and find
The undiscovered marvels of my fate.
And can you picture,— you, with thoughtful eyes,—
How in the city fared that dreaming boy,
Credulous still of all the golden tales
Which from the poets' music and the light
Of sunset-wests he had distilled to drops
Of keener essence? Can your vision pierce
The coarse engulfing crowds of teeming men
Down to the last deep, where in shrinking doubt,
I, child and dreamer, moved,— first whelmed by power; —
Then lost, as, by some spell, the pomp and stress
Crumbled about me,— and I stood alone
In a vast desert. Dust, pitiful dust
Lay that existence in my shrinking hand.
Where was the lofty doom my dreams had sung?
Where were the ecstasies and the hours of flame?
Bewildered grew the promise of my soul,
As the world's business, sordid oft and base,
Seethed by me like a nightmare: all men's thoughts
Seemed rapt in petty matters which like leaves
Floated upon the vortex of the hour

And then were drowned beneath the on-rushing stream,
Forgotten and unmemorable. Those hearts
In whom, methought, long intercourse of life
Had surely stored some more-revealing sense
Of what our being meant, and what was good,
And where the true goal for our striving lay,—
Those, intricately netted, seemed to dwell
A thousand fathoms deep beneath the tide
Of fragmentary labors toward no end,
Like play of madmen. None, of all I saw,
Felt the great doubts that hem our mortal lot,
Or looked with wonder toward the tranquil stars
Or into the far depths of his own soul.
Unguided conflict,— random ebb and flow
Of days and deeds,— confusion of one force
Smiting against another in its path,—
What could I make of these unreasoned things?
And to my sense, fevered with strange dismay,
Men loomed like brutes who in the forest roved,
Whose history was recorded by gnawed roots
And trampled grasses,— and white bones at last.

Another race they seemed; yet as I dwelt
There in the town, and labored at my trade
Shoulder to shoulder with them, slowly passed
That sense of alienage. Into my thought
Slowly there entered, gradual bit by bit,

Some consonance with theirs. By painful steps
I came to know why toiling men put by
The visions that had nurtured them in youth.
I saw the vanity of the rootless joy
Which youth and beauty foster till the hour
When weight of burdens kills the fragile bloom.
The harshness of the actual iron world
Broke in upon my spirit. I beheld
Bitter realities as the ruling force
Upon this pitiful soul of ours, which strains
Heavenward on frail wings. I saw the dream,
Woven of all the past's enchanted gold,
Shattered by those necessities which ride
With vast material dominance through the realm
Of spiritual being. I saw earth, sea,
Time, space, all yield, reluctant, to the toil
Of man who in that desperate flux and press
Battles for barely life. Until at last
I, also, cast all hope and rapture by;
Acknowledged me as servant of cruel powers,—
A pigmy struggling in a tragic world
For mere existence: — I, who late had thought
To choose among the destinies of the Gods
For which should best accord with my desire!
Thereupon I became as other men,
Spending my heart upon each worthless task,
Incurious of the meaning; and, as they,

No longer scrupulous of little things
Like careless wrongs, or other lives awry
By my rough passing: I no longer set
Patterns of beauty for the weary soul;
But as of very need, accepted quite
The creed that was my fellows', half-resigned
Unto a world of chaos ultimate.

So the years passed, as in the city's streets
I moved and had my life, where crowded days
Stifled all pause for thought. Yet in the Spring
Sometimes strange passions would revisit me;
And night-long I have lain awake to watch
The bright processions of my former dreams
Arise again and pitifully lead
Their ranks in holy wars to conquer back
The soul's lost empire from those tyrant powers
Which should have subject station and obey,
Not master, life. And lo! one April noon
As o'er my task I labored, from lone deeps
Long buried in me, burst a fierce revolt
Against that creature which I had become.
I cried — This life of mine, this dull, misshaped
And vegetable being, shall not be
My final sepulcher! I will arise:
I will go up into the lofty places
Apart from all man's works, and there commune

With God and mine own soul. I will search out
By lonely thought some meaning or accord
Or radiant sanction that may justify
The ways of life. The void and troubled world
Will I renounce, to gain in solitude
What the world gave not,— sense of life's design.

Then fared I toward the mountains of the north,
That land behind us yonder, where the wastes
Of aught but God's own self are tenantless.
And wandering aimless, in the weary mood
Of one who finds the glories of the earth
Glamouries only, to this spot I came,—
A far retreat whose name to me was known
Long as a legend. When I saw these walls
Which from their dizzy height looked calmly down
Upon the distant world,— beheld the blue
Of tranquil heaven around these summits cling,
Where no sound broke the silence of the slopes,
Lo! this, I felt, was my abiding-place,
My spiritual home, where life might be
Once more my own and not the multitude's.
Thereupon, with glad zeal, I sought the gate,
Begging admission to the brotherhood;
Though little holiness was in my soul
Save that which God's omniscient tender eyes
Might find in the wild longing that was mine

For something nobler than my days had found.
And when my rapt novitiate was past,
I with exultant lips assumed the vow
Of life-long service, and irrevocably
Closed the last portals of the world behind.

Peace here I sought, a little peace from life,—
A little time that might pass gently by
Afar from the coarse clamors of the world
And purposeless confusions. I would trace
In silence and seclusion that fine thread
On which are strung, like fair or faded flowers
Along a garland, the successive days:
Which in the city's press become a heap
Of crushed disordered blossoms, and conceal
The filament that joins them. For meseemed
That, as a reveler by cups of wine
At last o'ercome no longer tastes the grape
But madness only — so where life is swift
And strong and tense and multitudinous
Of forms and deeds, there life annulls itself
Into confusion; and the crowded years
Are filled with living till no life remains.
Hence with great yearning I desired to dwell
Apart from these things, in a place of peace
Where, from the visions of the sunrise hills
And books and musing talk and the low voice

Of my own soul, I might remould the world
Into a pattern beautiful and clear.
My hope was high to reconcile at last
The harsh disorder of the warring earth
With needs and verities that dwelt within. . . .
I try to tell you these things but I think
I cannot pour their meaning into words
Unless you too already somewhat know
Whereof I speak. . . .

Slow passed the tranquil days
Of my first years in St. Stephanos' walls.
Prayer, and long service at the altar-place,
And common speech, and silence much alone,
Were mine as portion. But contentment dwelt
No more with me. Great weariness in its place
Became my fellow, and a sense of foiled
Inaction haunted me, more hard to bear
Than turmoil. For the visions came no more
Which once at Myconos had filled my soul;
Or if they came, of little worth they seemed
To one who had beheld the toiling world
And the great pulsing streams which in the streets
Of crowded cities meet and part and strain
In dim and purgatorial confluence.
Somberly I beheld, with alien eyes,
My brother-priests serve at the altar-cross,

And with untroubled worship send their souls
Straight through the incense to the blissful seat
Of God the Father. But my lagging thoughts
Tarried behind upon the strong young heads
Of the few shepherds who, amid these heights
Now wandering, knelt at mass within our gates.
Their troubled lives, their toil, their fears and hopes
Stood between me and Heaven. Their life was mine,
Their laboring days were mine. I felt arise
Like a great tide the sense of fleeting things —
Tenderness, joy, labor and hope and strife,—
All ours a little while, then to be gone;
But when departed, treasured in the heart
With clinging light of old remembrances.
I felt that glow, unutterably sweet,
Which makes the love of life haunt all our days
With wonder and desire. My homesick breast
Longed for the eager city and its stress
Of meeting man with man: — things theirs, but now
Not mine for evermore. And then, too late,
In certitude I knew myself one born
A passionate child of life and not of dreams.

As here I dwelt through slow unchanging days,
This knowledge waxed in me. Gone was the hope,
Eternally, I think, of infinite joy
Awaiting in some fortunate golden land.

But the rude fellowship of the eager world
Called me, and calls me still. I am content
With quieter thoughts than those which once transformed
My being, as the sunlight a fair cloud
Transfuses into wonderful wreaths of gold.
No more do I desire upon the hills
To stand at even, and feel through my veins
Pour wild unutterably stirring breath
Of harmony with some transcendent lyre
Singing where sunset faded down the slopes.
For I have passed the magic of that time
And youth's unbodied visions. I have seen
The half-lights of the exquisite morning fade,
And daylight walk the land. And I have taught
The baffled spirit to forego its dreams,
Content within a less imperial space,
Amid the things that are. For now meseems
That nothing in the world is wholly fair
And nothing wholly foul; but all are blent
Of a strange stuff, whose mingled dark and bright
I saw, and still must cherish till I die.

O youths who stand upon the singing hills,
Your bosoms full of singing! Well you know
The sacred light of vision, the unrest
Of pure desire for some immortal goal!
But you have yet to learn the common face

Of life and days and plain realities
And the slow reconcilements of the heart.

But I have learned; and now I long to go.—
I would return unto the city's strife,
And move amid the vast and thrilling crowds,
Those wonderful crowds of living, breathing men;
And feel again the wildly stirring sense
That every passing form might prove to me
A comrade or a brother or a foe,
A lover or a well of fierce desire!
With unsolved powers each one is eloquent.
There in the city moves no single form
So mean or lofty that it may not be
A shuttle in the dizzying gold-shot web
Which, stretching out on all sides round me there,
Inscrutably is woven; and creates,
Out of chance looks and errant turns and stops
And random meetings and unpurposed words,
The infinite woof that is my life and me.
That life I cry for! Here I die of dreams.
I perish, as a breath along the wastes."

And I, to whom the tale had been a scroll
In a strange language writ, which line by line
Revealed dim meaning, could not make reply.
But looking down from those monastic walls,—
That hoary refuge of a thousand years

Remote upon the precipice of the rocks,—
Once more the sense of ending Summer crept
Out of the night upon me: and once more
I seemed as one who looks from a far place
Upon a scene wherein he has no part.
I viewed, as one beholds a gathered flower,
Man's life, and its strange pitifulness; so sweet
That memory makes the heart to overflow:
So bitter that men turn from it, as turned
This soul beside me, to the world of dreams:
So fleeting, that the darkness hovers close
Even while the seeker pauses to debate
The better path, or turns to mourn in vain
A choice regretted, and the days go by
Bearing what still remains. . . .

With calmer words
Now Theodorus spoke.—
"For I would have
A little light, leaping from eye to eye,—
A little warmth, as hand grasps eager hand
In swift adventure at whose every turn
Some eager lure awaits: — it is not much,
But it is everything! Tenderness, joy,
Labor and love and strife,— all fleeting things,
But sweeter than the sharp sweet island wine,
And the one solace . . . and the one solace!"

Then without pause for answer, he was gone
And the night hid him. To my troubled rest
Shortly I went, nor sought his side again,
Having no speech to answer the dim tale
Which he had uttered, though I think he knew
It was not coldness silenced me.

At dawn
I rose and forth proceeded on my way
Over the mountains. As I turned to look
Back for the last time at those gray walls
And weathered battlements, my final sight
Was Theodorus, in his following eyes
That strange tense wistfulness for joy and life,
As from the gate he waved me a farewell.

LYRICS

THE GREY RIVER

THE swallows have departed.
The harvest moon has come.
O rare, O lyric-hearted,
Why are you dumb?

Your words, that once in summer
Glowed like a magic wine,
Are frozen. Aye! and dumber
Than yours are mine.

The mists upon the river
Drift like ghosts in a dream.
I think such greyness never
Has hung on the stream.

I think such greyness never
Has brooded over me.
Greyly flows the river
Down to the sea.

TO THE HARPIES

YOU who with birch or laurel
Are swift to scourge or bless —
Silence your foolish quarrel
Before her loveliness.

What though she went a-travel
Down paths you do not know?
Your words shall not unravel
Webs that allured her so.

Hush now your foolish babble
Around her golden head.
Shut out the prying rabble.
Be happy. She is dead.

Now give one final kindness
That late you dreamed not of —
Silence, to cloak your blindness —
Peace, since you know not love.

TO AN OLD FRIEND

YOU have determined all that life should be;
I think it still an infinite mystery: —
Therefore we disagree.

Go, friend, and trouble not our happy past
With memory of the parting here at last
Amid confusions vast.

Go — and remember me as one astray,
If so you will. Aye, if you choose it, pray
For my misguided way.

Perhaps,— who knows? — from deeps I must explore
I shall look back regretful to the shore
Where we two walked before.

Or else, perhaps, across a troubled sea
My reckless sail shall push inflexibly
Till the west swallows me.

Then warnings of my doom your children tell.—
Say that your friend, whose life was launched so well,
Went to eternal hell.

Or will you be more honest? — will you say
That in the closing of a stormy day
Your friend once sailed away —

And that mid foam that deafened all replies
He passed beyond the vision of your eyes
To luminous western skies?

PORTRAIT OF AN OLD WOMAN

SHE limps with halting painful pace,—
Stops,— wavers,— and creeps on again,—
Peers up with dim and questioning face
Void of desire or doubt or pain.

Her cheeks hang gray in waxen folds
Wherein there stirs no blood at all.
A hand like bundled cornstalks holds
The tatters of a faded shawl.

Where was a breast, sunk bones she clasps.
A knot jerks where were woman-hips.
A ropy throat sends writhing gasps
Up to the tight line of her lips.

Here strong the city's pomp is poured. . . .
She stands, unhuman, bleak, aghast,—
An empty temple of the Lord
From which the jocund Lord has passed.

He has builded him another house,
Whenceforth his flame, renewed and bright,
Shines stark upon these weathered brows
Abandoned to the final night.

LINES FOR TWO FUTURISTS

WHY does all of sharp and new
That our modern days can brew
Culminate in you?

This chaotic age's wine
You have drunk — and now decline
Any anodyne.

On the broken walls you stand,
Peering toward some stony land
With eye-shading hand.

Is it lonely as you peer?
Do you never miss, in fear,
Simple things and dear,

Half remembered, left behind?
Or are backward glances blind
Here where the wind

Round the outposts sweeps and cries —
And each distant hearthlight dies
To your restless eyes? . . .

I too stand where you have stood;
And the fever fills my blood
With your cruel mood.

Yet some backward longings press
On my heart: yea, I confess
My soul's heaviness.

Me a homesick tremor thrills
As I dream how sunlight fills
My familiar hills.

Me the yesterdays still hold —
Liegeman still unto the old
Stories sweetly told.

Into that profound unknown
Where the earthquake forces strown
Shake each pilèd stone

Look I; and exultance smites
Me with joy; the splintered heights
Call me with fierce lights.

But a piety still dwells
In my bones; my spirit knells
Solemnly farewells

To safe halls where I was born —
To old haunts I leave forlorn
For this perilous morn.

Yet I come! I cannot stay!
Be it bitter night, or day
Glorious,— your way

I must tread; and on the walls,
Where this flame-swept future calls
To fierce miracles,

Lo, I greet you here! But me
Mock not lightly. I come free —
But with agony.

IN LONELY LANDS

THUS straying —
Infinitely delaying —
Turning into the wastes ofttimes aside —
Borne out to empty sea on the breast of many a tide —
Seduced by winds of Maying,—
O yet, belovèd and belovèds, bide
A little, and with patience overspread
My shelterless head
Which, to a righteous heaven, such target stands
As must invite the dread
Judgment-pronouncing brands
On me, still straying. . . .
O you and ye, trust me a little while;
Love me a little, touch me with your hands;
Believe a little that I still wander praying
In lonely lands.

A VERY OLD SPRING-SONG

I AM too old for their wisdom, that is so young.
Less than nothing to me are the paths they have set.
Shrill in my ears is the song by the Maenads sung
When like a storm down the hillsides their speed was flung —
And I am not so foolish I can forget.

Bosoms shaken and lips that are riots of June —
Arms wild, knees wild, hair wild, tossed like the spray —
Mocking the icy dreams of the trancèd moon —
Lifting flaunting laughter, a wanton tune
For the wanton winds of the night to ravish away!

Give me wine! Give me the rout, and hands
Mad to meet mine, arms that are starved for me.
Now when Spring comes dancing over the lands,
Blue robe streaming slipped from its girdle-bands,—
Am I a rock, to be blind when all must see?

Wine! Wine! Wine! and the wine of eyes
Lighting to mine, eager to slay me or drown
All their will in my deeps,— a passion that flies
Blindingly past my vision,— a tumult that cries —
" Up to the midnight hills where the stars go down! "

I am too old for their wisdom; aye, far too old
For what the greybeards mutter beside the fire.

I remember that lone in the darkness cold
Earth and silence will soon my wisdom enfold. . . .
Now will I shout on the hilltops of my desire!

THE JEWELS OF THE SUN

GRAVE was your speech; where the departing year
Down slopes to westward smouldered, a dim fear
Drew slowly near

And held you,— fear not for your hopes but mine,
Through whom the autumn chillness poured sharp wine,
A passionate anodyne.

"To you fresh mysteries bring each day their lure,"
At last you said. "Would that my heart were sure
They can endure!

"But I mistrust the tides of your unrest.
What if at last, having with rebel breast
Stormed up the west,

"The jewels of the setting sun you hold
In eager hands,— to find the fires grown cold,
And you are old? —

"And bitterness enshrouds your heart with grey,
Homesick at last for that fair tranquil day
You cast away?"

I was too drunk with wonder to reply,
There where the sunset fired the shattered sky
And day went by.

But here where night enwalls my solitude
There comes out of the vaults wherein I brood
A speaking mood —

And I would now have you forever know
I see unduped the path whereon I go
To heights or overthrow.

. . . . . .

Aye, mine shall be the jewels of the sun!
But when the splendour of the fight is done
And the race run —

Think you I know not of the day to be
When all my world shall turn to vanity
And life grow black to me?

Now flight is mine, from azure peak to peak.
Soon, soon enough, the pinions shall grow weak
And the strength break.

Soon shall the noonday of my longing set;
Soon shall the wings,—yes, even the heart, forget.
And yet, and yet —

Begrudge me not my moment of desire —
My fleeting hope that rises fiercely higher
Toward the sun's fire.

It too shall pass. Yet of such flights as these
Is woven the tissue of the destinies
Of all that man now is.

And out of such his future shall come forth —
Flights to the sun, the west, the icy north —
Each of so little worth.

Yet as I live, these hold my utter trust.
I love the one hour when from dying dust
Man rises in fierce lust,

And strikes athwart the sky in wild delight,
Athirst for regions far beyond his sight. . . .
Then comes the night —

And downward sinks the tired wing, and slow
Beats the mad heart that past the sun would go —
In fatal overthrow.

Mine too shall come! I, in some haven blest,
Shall also in the end sink down oppressed
To the predestined rest.

And other wings shall beat across the blue,
And other hearts shall dream their dreams come true,
Kindled anew.

But not in me. Life, that is lord of all,
Shall have passed by me,— passed beyond recall
In that late Fall.

Doubtless my lips shall then unsay things said
When all the glory of living flight was shed
Around my head.

And I shall clasp, with weak and thankful heart,
Whatever faded blossom there apart
Can ease my smart.

Blot then my name! Divorce me from the past!
Mark me as one whom life has used, and cast
Into the dust at last!

And write above my doorway —" This is one
Who grasped, an hour, the jewels of the sun —
Whose tale is done."

SNOWTIME

IS it Summer that you crave —
Swallows dipping wing—
Evening light across the wave —
Or some remoter thing?

Some report of happier places —
Golden times and lands —
New and wonder-laden faces —
New and eager hands?

Nay, you know not. . . . But I know
Round you cold is furled
Like this shroud of trampled snow
That smothers up the world —

Where no trust in any Spring
Now can heal or save,
Nor the icy sunlight bring
Swallows o'er the wave.

THE THREE SISTERS

GONE are those three, those sisters rare
With wonder-lips and eyes ashine.
One was wise and one was fair,
And one was mine.

Ye mourners, weave for the sleeping hair
Of only two your ivy vine.
For one was wise and one was fair,
But one was mine.

TO A CHILD — TWENTY YEARS HENCE

YOU shall remember dimly,
Through mists of far-away,
Her whom, our lips set grimly,
We carried forth today.

But when, in days hereafter,
Unfolding time shall bring
Knowledge of love and laughter
And trust and triumphing,—

Then from some face the fairest,
From some most joyous breast,
Garner what there is rarest
And happiest and best,—

The youth, the light, the rapture
Of eager April grace,—
And in that sweetness, capture
Your mother's far-off face.

And all the mists shall perish
That have between you moved.
You shall see her you cherish;
And love, as we have loved.

FATHERS AND SONS

CHILD to whom my loneliness
Cries — and cries, I know, in vain,—
Down the years I look and bless;
Down the years let my hand press
Strong your shoulder. I am fain
You should reap from my sown pain
Flowers of joy and loveliness,
Child I love, and love in vain.

You will never turn to me
As I turn and cry to you.
Regions strange and visions new
Shall be yours to search and see.
Old and alien I shall be.
I who love you set you free.
Yet recall I cried to you,
Child I love so utterly.

I AM WEARY OF BEING BITTER

I AM weary of being bitter and weary of being wise,
And the armor and the mask of these fall from me, after long.
I would go where the islands sleep, or where the sea-dawns rise,
And lose my bitter wisdom in the wisdom of a song.

There are magics hid in melodies, unknown of the sages.
The powers of purest wonder on fragile wings go by.
Doubtless out of the silence of dumb preceding ages
Song woke the chaos-world,— and light swept the sky.

All that we know is idle; idle is all we cherish;
Idle the will that takes loads that proclaim it strong.
For the knowledge, the strength, the burden, all shall perish.
One thing only endures, one thing only,— song.

ELEVEN O'CLOCK

AT last after many wanderings
I believe in the true gospel.
I will write no line for any man
Nor for all men together.
For myself, as from myself,
Shall my songs have being,—
As out of chaos
The stars and planets
Emerged, authentic lights of their own life.
For myself and from myself
Shall my words issue.
And if hereafter
Any who follows
Find in the wandering lights and scattered dust
Aught eloquent of sunrise or of harvest,
He shall be welcome to his sea-drift,
His random salvage.

Yet, it may be,
I from my icy bondage,
My far seclusion,
Shall in the end falter and break my vigil,
Drawn out to him by love that leaps the walls
Of perfect peace.

— But this is weakness!
Mine is the living gospel.
I will write no more for any man,
Aye, not for all men.

THE BIRDCAGE

O TRAGIC bird! whose bleeding feet,
Whose maddened wings dizzily beat
Against your cage in agony,
Soon, soon to win your liberty!
Still you believe that happiness
Dwells just beyond the bars you press,—
That if a sudden miracle
Gave your desire, life would be well.
The old old dream! The old old lure!
The devil plays; his stakes are sure.
With happiness he baits his gin
That still mankind shall perish in.
And still we trust our hearts could be
Blessed by the distant liberty,
Blind to the newer agony! . . .
The earth will be a frozen coal
Before man knows his traitor soul.

AMONG SHADOWS

IN halls of sleep you wandered by,
This time so indistinguishably
I cannot remember aught of it
Save that I know last night we met.
I know it by the cloudy thrill
That in my heart is quivering still;
And sense of loveliness forgot
Teases my fancy out of thought.
Though with the night the vision wanes,
Its haunting presence still may last —
As odour of flowers faint remains
In halls where Helen's shade has passed.

LIKE HIM WHOSE SPIRIT

LIKE him whose spirit in the blaze of noon
Still keeps the memory of one secret star
That in the dusk of a remembered June
Thrilled the strange hour with beauty from afar —
And perilous spells of twilight snare his heart,
And wistful moods his common thoughts subdue,
And life seethes by him utterly apart —
Last night I dreamed, today I dream, of you.
Gleams downward strike; bright bubbles upward hover
Through the charmed air; far sea-winds cool my brow.
Invisible lips tell me I shall discover
Today a temple, a mystery, a vow. . . .
The cycle rounds: only the false seems true.
Last night I dreamed, today I dream, of you.

MEETING

GREY-ROBED Wanderer in sleep . . . Wanderer — . . .
You, also, move among
Those silent halls
Dim on the shore of the unsailèd deep?
And your footfalls, yours also, Wanderer,
Faint through those twilight corridors have rung?

Of late my eyes have seen. . . . Wanderer. . . .
— Amid the shadow's gloom
Of that sleep-girdled place
I should have known such joy could not have been —
To see your face; — and yet, Wanderer,
What hopes seem vain beneath the night in bloom?

Wearily I awake. . . . Wanderer. . . .
Your look of old despair
Like a dying star
In morning vanishes. But for all memories' sake,—
Though you are far,— tonight, O Wanderer,
Tonight come, though in silence, to the shadows there. . . .

A LOVE LETTER

NOW looking back across the twenty years,
Seeing once more your delicate bended head,
Feeling once more the sharp salt of your tears
Upon my lips,— things that I thought were dead
Rise and will speak,— speak of the dream we knew,
The white hours, the incredible hours, now done.
I feel again the magic winds that blew
Across our twilights; and I seem alone
With you once more, when in the lamplit glow
You filled the dusks with terrible melody,
Borne on whose flood my spirit seemed to grow
Into that greater which I longed to be.
And then I see the days that followed after,—
The dark days, the blind days, when there rang
Through our old haunts a shriek of ribald laughter
To mock the melodies that late you sang.
I see the uncertain gloom, the sudden end,—
The end of loving,— and the madhouse days.
You said —" I cannot, dare not,— O my friend! " . . .
Little you knew the parting of our ways!
You went, and utterly were vanished thence.
I see the shadowy months that after passed —
And then the years grey with indifference
When all I prayed was dying died at last.
Until there came an iron callous mood,—
Scorn of mankind,— a blessèd icy dumb
Contempt for life, like poison in my blood —

The bitter scoffing brain I have become.
Oh love, tonight, led by some trick of fate,
Seeing the dream we cowards never proved,
There rises in me an immortal hate
For you, the only soul that I have loved.

THE OLD MEN'S TALE

(FROM "THE HISTORY OF THE THREE KINGDOMS" BY LO KUAN CHUNG)

GREEN are the hills as in far times forgotten.
But past them flows a river to the eastward
That journeys ever, and that changes ever —
A ceaseless current.

The gifted and the great have known its windings,
And drifted with them past our farthest vision.
And good and evil and defeat and conquest
Down that stream vanish.

We, the old men, white-haired and full of leisure,
Quietly tend our little isle of waters,
Spending our days in the calm life of fishers
With the flood round us.

We look upon the silent moon of Autumn;
And feel the coolness of the Spring's light breezes;
And with a jar of gleeful wine between us
We meet together;

And all the past, gone down the eternal river,
And all the present, floating on its bosom,
Are to us but a pleasant tale remembered,
Told in the twilight.

CHLOROFORM

(WRITTEN IN COLLABORATION WITH MARY ALDIS)

A SICKENING odour, treacherously sweet,
Steals through my sense heavily.
Above me leans an ominous shape,
Fearful, white-robed, hooded and masked in white.
The pits of his eyes
Peer like the port-holes of an armored ship,
Merciless, keen, inhuman, dark.
The hands alone are of my kindred;
Their slender strength, that soon shall press the knife
Silver and red, now lingers slowly above me,
The last link with my human world . . .

. . . The living daylight
Clouds and thickens.
Flashes of sudden clearness stream before me,— and then
A menacing wave of darkness
Swallows the glow with floods of vast and indeterminate
grey.
But in the flashes
I see the white form towering,
Dim, ominous,
Like some apostate monk whose will unholy
Has renounced God; and now
In this most awful secret laboratory
Would wring from matter

Its stark and appalling answer.
At the gates of a bitter hell he stands, to wrest with eager
fierceness
More of that dark forbidden knowledge
Wherefrom his soul draws fervor to deny.

The clouds have grown thicker; they sway around me
Dizzying, terrible, gigantic, pressing in upon me
Like a thousand monsters of the deep with formless arms.
I cannot push them back, I cannot!
From far, far off, a voice I knew long ago
Sounds faintly thin and clear.
Suddenly in a desperate rebellion I strive to answer,—
I strive to call aloud.—
But darkness chokes and overcomes me:
None may hear my soundless cry.
A depth abyssmal opens
And receives, enfolds, engulfs me,—
Wherein to sink at last seems blissful
Even though to deeper pain. . . .

O respite and peace of deliverance!
The silence
Lies over me like a benediction.
As in the earth's first pale creation-morn
Among winds and waters holy
I am borne as I longed to be borne.

I am adrift in the depths of an ocean grey
Like seaweed, desiring solely
To drift with the winds and waters; I sway
Into their vast slow movements; all the shores
Of being are laved by my tides.
I am drawn out toward spaces wonderful and holy
Where peace abides,
And into golden æons far away.

But over me
Where I swing slowly
Bodiless in the bodiless sea,
Very far,
Oh very far away,
Glimmeringly
Hangs a ghostly star
Toward whose pure beam I must float resistlessly.
Well do I know its ray!
It is the light beyond the worlds of space,
By groping sorrowing man yet never known —
The goal where all men's blind and yearning desire
Has vainly longed to go
And has not gone: —
Where Eternity has its blue-walled dwelling-place,
And the crystal ether opens endlessly
To all the recessed corners of the world,
Like liquid fire

Pouring a flood through the dimness revealingly;
Where my soul shall behold, and in lightness of wonder
rise higher
Out of the shadow that long ago
Around me with mortality was furled.

I rise where have winds
Of the night never flown;
Shaken with rapture
Is the vault of desire.
The weakness that binds
Like a shadow is gone.
The bonds of my capture
Are sundered with fire!

This is the hour
When the wonders open!
The lightning-winged spaces
Through which I fly
Accept me, a power
Whose prisons are broken —

. . . But the wonder wavers —
The light goes out.
I am in the void no more; changes are imminent.
Time with a million beating wings
Deafens the air in migratory flight

Like the roar of seas — and is gone . . .
And a silence
Lasts deafeningly.
In darkness and perfect silence
I wander groping in my agony,
Far from the light lost in the upper ether —
Unknown, unknowable, so nearly mine.
And the ages pass by me,
Thousands each instant, yet I feel them all
To the last second of their dragging time.
Thus have I striven always
Since the world began.
And when it dies I still must struggle . . .

. . . . . .

The voice I knew so long ago, like a muffled echo under the sea
Is coming nearer.
Strong hands.
Grip mine.
And words whose tones are warm with some forgotten consolation,
Some unintelligible hope,
Drag me upward in horrible mercy;
And the cold once-familiar daylight glares into my eyes.

He stands there,
The white apostate monk,

Speaking low lying words to soothe me.
And I lift my voice out of its vales of agony
And laugh in his face,
Mocking him with astonishment of wonder.
For he has denied;
And I have come so near, so near to knowing . . .

Then as his hand touches me gently, I am drawn up
from the lonely abysses,
And suffer him to lead me back into the green valleys of
the living.

SWINBURNE, AN ELEGY

I

THE autumn dusk, not yearly but eternal,
Is haunted by thy voice.
Who turns his way far from the valleys vernal
And by dark choice
Disturbs those heights which from the low-lying land
Rise sheerly toward the heavens, with thee may stand
And hear thy thunders down the mountains strown.
But none save him who shares thy prophet-sight
Shall thence behold what cosmic dawning-light
Met thy soul's own.

II

Master of music! unmelodious singing
Must build thy praises now.
Master of vision! vainly come we, bringing
Words to endow
Thy silence,— where, beyond our clouded powers,
The sun-shot glory of resplendent hours
Invests thee of the Dionysiac flame.
Yet undissuaded come we, here to make
Not thine enrichment but our own who wake
Thy echoing fame.

III

Under some turf, I know not where, in slumber
Lies all thy mortal part;
And wintry rains and fallen leaves now cumber
That ruined heart.
Soon shall thy frame, like any common clay,
Transformed to wild-flowers, rise to greet the day,
Than those which from an oaf spring not more fair.
But far from where the wintry rain-drops fall,—
In many a lighted welcoming festal hall,—
Thy soul is there.

IV

Not o'er thy dust I brood,— I who have never
Looked in thy living eyes.
Nor hoarded blossom shall I come to sever
Where thy grave lies.
Let witlings dream, with shallow pride elate,
That they approach the presence of the great
When at the spot of birth or death they stand.
But hearts in whom thy heart lives, though they be
By oceans sundered, walk the night with thee
In alien land.

V

For them, grief speaks not with the tidings spoken
That thou art of the dead.
No lamp extinguished when the bowl is broken,
No music fled
When the lute crumbles, art thou nor shalt be;
But as a great wave, lifted on the sea,
Surges triumphant toward the sleeping shore,
Thou fallest, in splendor of irradiant rain,
To sweep resurgent all the ocean plain
Forevermore.

VI

The seas of earth with flood-tides filled thy bosom;
The sea-winds to thy voice
Lent power; the Grecian with the English blossom
Twined, to rejoice
Upon thy brow in chaplets of new bloom;
And over thee the Celtic mists of doom
Hovered to give their magic to thy hand;
And past the moon, where Music dwells alone,
She woke, and loved, and left her starry zone
At thy command.

VII

For thee spake Beauty from the shadowy waters;
For thee Earth garlanded
With loveliness and light her mortal daughters;
Toward thee was sped
The arrow of swift longing, keen delight,
Wonder that pierces, cruel needs that smite,
Madness and melody and hope and tears.
And these with lights and loveliness illume
Thy pages, where rich Summer's faint perfume
Outlasts the years.

VIII

Outlasts, too well! For of the hearts that know thee
Few know or dare to stand
On thy keen chilling heights; but where below thee
Thy lavish hand
Has scattered brilliant jewels of summer song
And flowers of passionate speech, there grope the throng
Crying —" Behold! this bauble, this is he! "
And of their love or hate, the foolish wars
Echo up faintly where amid lone stars
Thy soul may be.

IX

But some, who find in thee a word exceeding
Even thy powers of speech —
To whom each song,— like an oak-leaf crimson, bleeding,
Fallen,— can teach
Tidings of that high forest whence it came
Where the wooded mountain-slope in one vast flame
Burns as the Autumn kindles on its quest —
These rapt diviners gather close to thee: —
Whom now the winter holds in dateless fee
Sealèd of rest.

X

Strings never touched before,— strange accents chanting,—
Strange quivering lambent words,—
A far exalted hope serene or panting
Mastering the chords,—
A sweetness fierce and tragic,— these were thine,
O singing lover of dark Proserpine!
O spirit who lit the Maenad hills with song!
O Augur bearing aloft thy torch divine,
Whose flickering lights bewilder as they shine
Down on the throng!

XI

Not thy deep glooms, but thine exceeding glory
Maketh men blind to thee.
For them thou hast no evening fireside story.
But to be free —
But to arise, spurning all bonds that fold
The spirit of man in fetters forged of old —
This was the mighty trend of thy desire;
Shattering the Gods, teaching the heart to mould
No longer idols, but aloft to hold
The soul's own fire.

XII

Yea, thou didst burst the final gates of capture;
And thy strong heart has passed
From youth, half-blinded by its golden rapture,
Into the vast
Desolate bleakness of life's iron spaces
And there found solace, not in faiths, or faces,
Or aught that must endure Time's harsh control.
In the wilderness, alone, when skies were cloven,
Thou hast thy garment and thy refuge woven
From thine own soul.

XIII

The faiths and forms of yesteryear are waning,
Dropping, like leaves.
Through the wood sweeps a great wind of complaining
As Time bereaves
Pitiful hearts of all that they thought holy.
The icy stars look down on melancholy
Shelterless creatures of a pillaged day —
A day of disillusionment and terror —
A day that yields no solace for the error
It takes away.

XIV

Thee with no solace, but with bolder passion
The bitter day endowed.
As battling seas from the frail swimmer fashion
At last the proud
Indomitable master of their tides
Who with exultant power splendidly rides
The terrible summit of each whelming wave,—
So didst thou reap, from fields of wreckage, gain;
Harvesting the wild fruit of the bitter main,—
Strength that shall save.

XV

Here where old barks upon new headlands shatter
And worlds seem torn apart,—
Amid the creeds now vain to shield or flatter
The mortal heart,—
Where the wild welter of strange knowledge won
From grave and engine and the chemic sun
Subdues the age to faith in dust and gold,—
The bardic laurel thou hast dowered with youth,
In living witness of the spirit's truth
Like prophets old.

XVI

Thee shall the future time with joy inherit.
Hast thou not sung and said —
" Save its own light, none leads the mortal spirit,
None ever led "?
Time shall bring many, even as thy steps have trod,
Where the soul speaks authentically of God,
Sustained by glories strange and strong and new.
Yet these most Orphic mysteries of thy heart
Only to kindred can thy speech impart;
And they are few.

XVII

Few men shall love thee, whom fierce powers have lifted
High beyond meed of praise.
But as some bark whose seeking sail has drifted
Through storm of days,
We hail thee, bearing back thy golden flowers
Gathered beyond the Western Isles, in bowers
That had not seen, till thine, a vessel's wake.
And looking on thee from our land-built towers
Know that such sea-dawn never can be ours
As thou sawest break.

XVIII

Now sailest thou dim-lighted, lonelier water.
By shores of bitter seas
Low is thy speech with Ceres' ghostly daughter,
Whose twined lilies
Are not more pale than thou, O bard most sweet,
Most bitter; — for whose brow sedge-crowns were mete
And crowns of splendid holly green and red;
Who passest from the dust of careless feet
To where the sunrise thou hast sought shall greet
Thy holy head.

XIX

Thou hast followed after him whose hopes were greatest,—
That meteor-soul divine;
Near whom divine I hail thee! — Thou the latest
Of the bright line
Of flame-lipped masters of the spell of song,
Enduring in succession proud and long,
The banner-bearers in triumphant wars: —
Latest,— and first of that bright line to be,
For whom thou also, flame-lipped, spirit-free,
Art of the stars.

GROTESQUES

THE GENTLE READER

"WHY does the poet choose to sing?
No impulse ever stirred in me
The wish to make myself a thing
To which all mocking jibes might cling!"
Perhaps he sees more than you see.

"Why should this fool go crying out
The secrets of his soul? In steel
I case myself, nor care to shout
Those things one does not talk about."
Perhaps he feels more than you feel.

"If I had wisdom to impart,
I'd say the thing, and let it go,—
Not trifle with a foolish art
And make a motley of my heart!"
Perhaps he knows more than you know.

WHY WOMEN HATE ARTISTS

THANKS, belovèd; here's your pay.
Now get you quickly out of the way.
For there are many more things to do;
And all my pictures can't image you.

— AND ALSO

Ladies who court me, pray court me with song;
I cannot be bothered with anything less.
Do me the honor of wearing full-dress —
Trust me to say when you've worn it too long.

A POETRY PARTY

FRONTING a Dear Child and an Infamy
You sat; and watched, with dusk-on-the-mountain eyes,
The marching river of the beer go by,
Alert in vain for a band-crash of surprise.
I also! Dawn, that in respectful way
Entered a-liveried, could no lightnings rouse
For which I watched; the calling-card of day
Flushed with no guilt your Hebridean brows.
Wherefore the Infamy and I went down
Into a street of windows high and blind.
His face, his tongue, his words, his soul, were brown.
But from a window lofty and left behind,
Like a silver trumpet over the gutter-dirt,
You waved! — (I know not what; perhaps a shirt.)

PORTRAIT OF A SPIRITUALLY DISTURBED GENTLEMAN

O PIECE of garbage rotting on a rug,—
To what a final ending hast thou come!
Art thou predestined fodder of a bug?
Shalt thou no more behold thy Dresden home?
When green disintegration works its last
Ruin, and all thy atoms writhe and start,
Shall no frilled-paper memories from the past
Drift spectral down the gravy of thy heart?
Can the cold grease from off the dirty plate
Make thee forget the ice-box of thy prime,
And soon, among the refuse-cans, thy fate
Blot out the gay fork-music of old time?
Ah well! All music has its awkward flats —
And after all, there are the alley-cats!

PORTRAIT OF JOHN COWPER POWYS, ESQ.

WHEN first the rebel hosts were hurled
From heaven,— and as they downward sped
Flashed by them world on glimmering world
Like mileposts on that road of dread,—

One ruined angel by strange chance
On earth lit stranded with spent wing.
There, when revived, he took his stance
In slightly battered triumphing.

And still he stands; though lightning-riven,
More riotous than ere he fell,—
Upon his brow the lights of heaven
Mixed with a fore-gleam out of hell.

TO AN OUTRAGEOUS PERSON

GOD forgive you, O my friend!
For, be sure, men never will.
Their most righteous wrath shall bend
Toward you all the strokes of ill.

You are outcast.— Who could bear,
Laboring dully, to behold
That glad carelessness you wear,
Dancing down the sunlight's gold?

Who, a self-discovered slave,
As the burdens on him press,
Could but curse you, arrant knave,
For your crime of happiness?

All the dogmas of our life
Are confuted by your fling —
Taking dullness not to wife,
But with wonder wantoning.

All the good and great of earth,
Prophesying your bad end,
Sourly watch you dance in mirth
Up the rainbow, O my friend!

PORTRAIT OF A PORTRAIT PAINTER

POISED like a nonchalant design
Of Cupid, hesitant he stands,
With eyes that pucker, measure, shine —
Brush, palette juggled in his hands.

He pauses in his pleasant strut —
Weighs brush — aims — and with panther-pace
Strides up to sweep one purple cut
On the blank canvas' passive face.

Backward and forward — aim, then leap —
He showers long gashes on the white.
The wounds bleed jewels; rainbows creep
In livid splendor forth to light.

A savage form begins to gleam,
Writhing in curious vibrant strife.
Like forces of a madness-dream
Rises a shape of monstrous life

Wherein with mordant calm he limns —
At last stripped bare of mild pretence
And casual dominance of his whims —
His own immortal insolence.

TO ARIOSTO, A NOTABLE CRICKET

COME drink a merry toast, O!
To little Ariosto.
All Peacocks that in pride may strut
The Alley are alluring — but
A certain sweetness debonair
Has dwelling only where our Ar-
Iosto sings his little tunes
Of mad and merry mystic runes,—
Of wine and wizardry and Spring,
And many another damnèd thing.
Doubtless the April winds that stir
Each grossly human Him or Her,
To Ariosto's tiny breast
Bear also tidings of unrest.
But what a curious kind of art
Must ease the burden of his heart!
Like Mordkin, Ruth St. Denis, and
The whole Terpsichorean band
Whose skill such joyful solace brings —
It's with his hind legs that he sings!

How short is life! He soon must hence
Vanish. But give him recompense.—
O hostess kind, pray seek no more
To sweep the last crumb from the floor.
And prithee spill, my gentle host,— O
One Bacchic drop — for Ariosto.

THE POLICE GAZETTE

WHERE drab along the thundering city streets
Straggles the crowd in somber dress and mean,
In a shop window often have I seen
A tiptoe form whose lure each passer greets —
Some silk-limbed girl whose smile our frowning meets —
Some little half-clad comic-opera queen
As whitely shimmering as the Cytherene,
A playful goddess of the printed sheets.

Strange light — that from this tinseled form pours gold
To follow me six footsteps on my way!
Strange ugly passers — whom this hussy bold
Lures with dull lust or chills with dull dismay!
Strange world — that has denied the gods of old
Who thus steal back amongst us in our day!

IN A BAR ROOM

ACROSS the polished board, wet and ashine,
Appalling incantations late have passed.
For some, the mercy of dull anodyne;
For others, hope destined an hour to last.
Here has been sold courage to lift the weak
That they embrace a great and noble doom.
Here some have bought a clue they did not seek
Into the wastes of an engulfing gloom.
And amorous tears, and high indignant hate,
Laughter, desires, passions, and hopes, and rest,—
The drunkard's sleep, the poet's shout to fate,—
All from these bottles filled a human breast!
Magician of the apron! Let us see —
What is that draught you are shaking now for me?

THE NEWEST BELIEVER

THROUGH his sick brain the shrieking bullet stormed,
Wrecking the chambers of his spirit's state.
The gleam that brightened and the glow that warmed
Those arrassed halls sank quenched and desolate.
Out of the balefully enfolding mesh,
Life he would free from dominance of evil;
And purpose deeper than the weak-willed flesh
Bade him renounce the world, the flesh, the devil.
And as I looked upon his shattered face
Hideously fronting me in that dark room,
I saw the Prophets of the Church take place
Beside him — they who dared the nether gloom
For worlds of life or silence far away,—
So hated they the evil of their day.

THE WICKED TO THE WISE

"A BRILLIANT mind, gone wrong!" . . .
O tell me, ye who throng
The beehives of the world, grow ye not ever weary of this song?

"The way our fathers went" . . .
Yes, if our days were spent
Sod-deep, beside our fathers' bones, wise, needless were your argument.

"The wisdom of the mass" . . .
Thank God, it too shall pass
Like the breathed film hiding the face grayly within the silvered glass.

"All's surely for the best!" . . .
Aye, so shall be confessed
By your sons' sons, marking where down we smote you as we onward pressed!

SONG OF A VERY SMALL DEVIL

HE who looks in golden state
Down from ramparts of high heaven,
Knows he any turn of fate
It must be of evil given —
He perhaps shall wander late
Downward through the luminous gate.

He who makes himself a gay
Dear familiar of things evil —
In some deepest tarn astray —
Close-companioned of the Devil,—
He can nowhere turn his way
Save up brighter slopes of day.

Plight it is, yet clear to see.
Hence take solace of your sinning.—
As ye sink unfathomably,
Heaven grows ever easier winning.
Therefore ye who saved would be,
Come and shake a leg with me!

THISTLES

THEY blow by the wayside, they march in the wood.—
"Tell me, for what are these vile weeds good?" . . .
Not as a crop for your meadow-land.
Not to seize and crush in your hand.
Not to eat, and not to smell;
Nor daisy-like can they fortunes tell.
Asses may eat, and take no harm —
Monkeys may hug them with unscathed arm —
But you — beware! how you touch this thing,
This amethyst-emerald bloom with a sting.
And yet — strange! — once did I know a man
Who watched all day where the thistles ran
In glorious straggling multitude
Out of the border of a wood.
He watched, enthralled, the whole day through.
Only when night hid from his view
Their purple riot of useless wars,
He turned, half-loath, to the kindred stars.

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